

Understanding Icelandic inspirations

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Abstract

The talk aims to outline the current state of affairs in Icelandic tourism marketing strategies and how these could optimally be informed by market research. The talk proceeds in outlining that which is known about tourists visiting the island and suggest what could be done to improve knowledge about Iceland's visitors. Two particular points of departure will be discussed. One is how the unravelling of source market inspirations and expectations towards Iceland could be researched. Here the value of psychographic segmentation in addition to the available demographic descriptors is discussed. How this information can possibly benefit the current emphasis on social media is the second point to be discussed. Here the focus is on recent marketing campaigns launched by the Icelandic tourism authorities in response to the eruption in Eyjafjallajökull. The campaigns *Inspired by Iceland* and its follow up *Ísland – allt árið* feature video commentaries and online chat forums where celebrities of varying degrees share their experience of Iceland. The talk concludes with how this sharing can possibly be the substance of tourism marketing and promotion in addition to how knowledge about the tourists' expectations can further underpin future trajectories of tourism marketing and development in Iceland.

Understanding Icelandic inspirations

Dear guests, visiting speaker and tourism stakeholders in Iceland,

First and foremost I would like to thank Promote Iceland for inviting me to take part in this seminar on the value of tourism source market segmentation. As the advert for this session indicates my role is to outline the state of affairs in Icelandic marketing and what it is that we know about our guests. As you can see from my opening slide what I then want to do is to outline how we could go about understanding the ways in which people are inspired by Iceland. Naturally, this wording is no coincidence. In the few minutes I have I will touch upon the ambitious marketing campaign, so named, and try to outline how it might play a role in communicating with the segments Icelandic tourism marketing stakeholders aim to define. To do this however, I have to unravel the idea of market segmentation and maybe throw up a couple of questions about its weight in our day and age.

Let me start by shortly outlining that which we know about our guests.

We are in many ways fortunate as more than nine of every ten guests departs through our only all-year round international airport in Keflavík. The Icelandic tourist board, following a tradition set in the late 1940s by the immigration office, counts all of those who display a foreign passport as they go through security and notes their nationality. This gives a very good idea about Icelandic source markets, although lacking from this is the purpose of travel and several other important factors.

These points can be surveyed. With almost all going through Keflavík the execution of border surveys is quite simple. Last summer the Icelandic Tourism Board outsourced some surveying work at Keflavík International airport. As far as I can tell their survey follows the format of previous surveys done, last in 2005. The results of the survey are not out yet, but another private consultant has also been busy producing survey data on departing visitors every year, all-through the year, since 2004. All this data both from the tourist board and private firms is summarised in tables of descriptive statistics in reports that are to be found online at the tourist board's website.

The content of this data can be summarised as simple demographic descriptors of our guests. Being from border surveys, mostly done through voluntary sampling, the perennial question of the representativeness of the surveys at each time remains. However for our purposes here we can assume that the broad strokes of Icelandic visitors can be drawn and summarised as;

Slightly mature (26-35), white, male, well educated, with high income compared to the home average and coming for the first time to experience nature for around 10 days with a plus 1 ... in a rental car.

CLICK – Meet Sven and his Yaris!

If we tick from the boxes of basic tourism marketing segmentation (**CLICK**), we can see that through the passport counting and survey demographics we have a statistical profile which tells us:

- **CLICK** –where the visitors live, that is where they come from and thus where our source markets lie. Not surprisingly they are close: Scandinavia, N. Europe and N. America.
- **CLICK** – age, sex, family and education status
- **CLICK** – why they came and where they got their information
- **CLICK** – if they have been before
- **CLICK** – and with whom they came, doing what

However we are only attaining very superficial knowledge about what these people think they need, how they think they will benefit from their trip and what motivated them in the first place. **CLICK** – what is known as the psychography of the guests, in addition to the demography we have. Obviously all efforts of this kind, towards a more nuanced account of our guests should be celebrated and will be a considerable step forward in marketing and concomitant product development in Iceland.

Segmenting based on drawing up some kind of a picture of the psychology of our guests would in its very basic form entail **CLICK** and understanding of their social class, lifestyles and personalities. Some indications can be gleaned from simple questioning like **CLICK** how and when a decision is made to come and by whom. But it is a more complex matter to query how individual dispositions, developed in the course of a life time, influence **CLICK** how one might perceive Iceland?

The tourism literature is replete with typologies where these individual dispositions are summarised into archetypes of certain individuals – or

segments. **CLICK** - all since the early 70s archetypes have emerged. Usually these types are associated with assumptions about their inherent quality and potential impact on tourism development, going from purely materialist mass tourists to the ideologist individual tourists. Obviously these different types will have very different motivations, needs and perceptions of benefits derived from the trip. Anybody can see that Wickens' **CLICK** heliolatrus tourist will not respond to the same marketing as Gallup's **CLICK** dreamers or Smith's **CLICK** explorers.

Now what the hell is a heliolatrus tourist...? ...Sun loving! Sometimes I wonder about my colleagues in academia 😊.

If we look more closely at one of our key markets, the UK, we can see their ideas for domestic market segmentation. **CLICK** This figure is based on UK household surveys utilised by VisitBritain in UK's tourism marketing. Based on 10 years of extensive surveying of hundreds of thousands of households and what prompts their purchase decisions, eight segments of the UK consumer in terms of travel preferences has been identified. Again, clearly visible are the polar opposites of the mass market segment and the individuality of motivations and ideas.

In a similar way, but casting their gaze outwards, we have seen how in Canada the Explorer Quotient is being sought through psychographic segmentation. Based on a 12 year international survey on the motivations of Canada's visitors, nine explorer segments were revealed **CLICK**. Here we have a clear idea of the different types of explorers out there, but looking at Sven we have the rough

idea that he wants to 'keep exploring', so we can assume that our guests could somehow fit here. Having done the 20 questions in the teaser quiz myself, I emerged as the **CLICK** Gentle Explorer ... **CLICK** ; conservative, reliable, traditional, solitary, selective, discriminating and fun-loving. That's me ... , but then again I live here...!

These segments or types are useful for Icelandic tourism and figuring these out in our context represents a major leap forward from the simple demographic descriptors we have. Based on the detailed outline of each of these types; what could be done is modify surveys, querying aspects that are said to characterise each of these types. Based on what we find we could start to plan general tourism development and particular product development to cater to these segments and thus make sure only the free spirits or authentic explorers hit the highland interior, whilst the no hassle traveller can do the Golden Circle. We can direct market messages in addition to making inferences about what pecuniary benefits might accrue from each segment and if they would be willing to come help us tackle the seasonality issues in Iceland tourism.

What needs to be borne in mind however (**CLICK**) about these typologies, is that they stereotype (**CLICK**), they do not allow the individual to change or progress (**CLICK**), they assume that each individual is fully autonomous in their decision making (**CLICK**), they focus on professed preferences rather than being based on the observation of actual behaviour (**CLICK**), they are almost solely focused on the recreational tourist and the one travelling for leisure, thus ignoring the business tourist (**CLICK**), and lastly and perhaps most fundamentally apart from being a bit Eurocentric, or Occidental if you like

(CLICK), it seems to have limited sensibilities towards the new media technologies and changes that have occurred with the by now undisputed information revolution. This is perhaps key in the Icelandic context where so much effort has been put in social media marketing, through e.g. the Inspired by Iceland campaign and its continuation.

Now, taking a couple of steps back and revisiting the time-line of typographies from Swarbrooke and Horner (CLICK). They tack on the end of their typographic timeline the 2002 idea of the post-tourist (CLICK) and thereby it ends. So, who is that post-tourist? Someone beyond tourism, someone not a tourist, but yet...?

Today with the blurring of leisure and work, ever increasing individual mobility, multiple home-ownership and cosmopolitan identities, and not least through and with information technology (CLICK);

... what was once different is now familiar and the necessity to travel to encounter difference is greatly diminished as the experience of foreign cultures, practices, tastes and fashions become routinely embedded in everyone's daily lives.

It would seem that globalisation whilst facilitating tourism is eroding its incentives to so many. But there is more here. What this means also is that the people out there, by now, know that you know that they know you are selling them something! People, at least in Icelandic source markets, have become aware consumers, 'prosumers' wielding a mouse through which 'foreign cultures, practices, tastes and fashions become routinely embedded in everyone's daily lives'.

What does this mean to the segments already defined? Can we just add some questions on the uses of social media and by that add yet another dimension to each psychographic segment? That will help, and as stated before, would do wonders for advancing Icelandic tourism market research. However, we need more meat on the bones of the survey work, we need more qualitative work that engages with our guests all through the purchasing decision making process, i.e. observing how they actually behave before, during and after!

What I stress here is the methodological aspects of coming to terms with the mouse wielding prosumer. Although I understand and fully appreciate the importance of describing our visitors and creating ever more nuanced typographies of them, I think these will run aground in ever shallower waters of marketing communication if they are not recognised for what they are. What we need to make sure then is that we understand our guests and account for them (CLICK) not only in rigorous, “full of facts”, and “concrete details” of the psychographic segments;

... but also in ways that are “literary”, “evocative”, “engaging”, “imaginative”, “accessible” and full of “flesh and blood emotions” and “feelings” ...

With this we can make room for the obvious fact that (CLICK) “Humans, their desires and plans, are clearly not the only things active in the world”. We are allowed to comprehend more fully (CLICK) “the nature of the relations between the objects and the subjects that constitute the tourist experience”.

What will start to emerge from these kinds of accounts is a differentiating and pluralizing depiction of the tourist experience and thus a recognition of our guests on their terms (**CLICK**). People are unruly and never fit into the categories we ascribe to them, especially when they know you are trying to. What we must do is think and work through this diversity rather than negating it. That we confront tourism as configured in relation to ourselves and Iceland, but not to arrive at an end state or defined way of being inspired by Iceland. As a consequence, “impossibility is now a means of communication.”¹ Simply not being consistent is how people relate to each other and the objects of their desire.

This might sound rather dense, but the simplicity of this rather complex message is quite striking. The tourist is to me never a conceivable whole that can be read through demographic parameters, be they however nuanced in terms of psychography. What I suggest is that in addition to making categories and fitting these persons into typologies, we allow ourselves an understanding of them and their relation to Iceland as unpredictable and inconsistent with both themselves and our own take on them.

Why should we do this?

Because they know we know they know we are selling them something! So let's have them speak.

¹ Deleuze, 1990, p. 198

Here again we are fortunate. The particular method of disseminating marketing message, through sharing via social media, is to me open for this plurality and diversification. “Creating a sense of place and telling a story” is a slogan accredited to a Tom Buncle invariably cited by the promoter of the Inspired campaign at Promote Iceland. To me this sense of place has no intrinsic value, it cannot be pitched in the right or wrong way to the right or wrong group of people. Through never being consistent we are able to share and relate. Recognising the tourist as potentially inspired by Iceland thus commands the attitude of respect to them and their way of doing and being that I argue is a necessary precondition to any ethical notions of hospitality.

So what am I saying? Yes, sharing via social media is what can be done, in light of the fact that I know, you know, I know you are selling me something, let’s allow Iceland to sell itself through giving the visitors the raw materials and tools to share their experiences.

To conclude let us look at a very recent inspiration by an event that prompted the on-going marketing efforts and debates in Iceland. In a recent interview with the national news programme Kastljós, the artist Vignir Jóhannsson states that communicating the E15 eruptions at Kastrup international is about (CLICK):

... a conversation with people around the same memories and then you create these puddles in time, where time pools up and is left behind when time flows over and is gone, a few of these might remain and it is there that this ... This is not exactly memories, but a shared experience, so people know what you are talking about ...

To visually represent this fundamental point (CLICK) we see how the artist renders the experience of this event in a plurality of ways. This is precisely how we communicate and what social media potentially allows for.

What I am saying, is let's give the segments a voice, paying heed to their actual behaviour in addition to their professed preferences.